Help Desk

*By Kevin Savetz**

Q Many companies these days are providing information automatically with addresses like info@bigcompany.com. I would like to set up an e-mail address that will automatically respond with information about my company too. How can I do that?

A What you're looking for is an electronic mail *autoresponder*, a program that sifts through your e-mail as it arrives to find messages that are requests for specific information. If it finds any, it answers them without any human intervention. Autoresponders aren't difficult to set up, and they can provide your customers with just the information they want quickly.

I use an autoresponder that gives out information about my book to anyone who requests it. When I receive mail with a subject line of "send YIC," the program automatically sends my prewritten message so I don't have to send the messages myself. Any messages that don't have that subject line end up in my regular electronic mailbox. This is a plus because you don't need to pay for an extra e-mail address for the autoresponder; it can share an address with you.

If you sell a product whose price fluctuates daily, you might be unwilling to print prices in a magazine advertisement. A potential customer might see your ad in a magazine and send e-mail to you with the one-line command "send prices." Users on the Internet can get information—a canned message with current prices—in minutes.

Autoresponders work because they can listen for incoming e-mail day and night. So, they must live on a computer that is perpetually connected to the Net. This generally means that it needs to run on your service provider's Unix computer rather than your own PC.

There are many autoresponder products available, and much shareware as well. My favorite e-mail autoresponder is EMBOT, a powerful, self-configuring program that works on any Unix system. It can respond to requests in the subject or the message or the body, and all mail that is not intended for EMBOT is automatically delivered to you. It can be configured to reply to any number of different commands, and can generate statistics about how many people requested your information. EMBOT is shareware: the cost is $25 for an individual or $100 for a small business. For more information, send e-mail to "embot@northcoast.com" with a subject line of "send help."

Q How can I find out how many people are accessing my Web site? What is a "hit" on a Web server?

A Just about all World Wide Web servers have an option that forces them to make a log of that site's usage. Typically, they'll make note of which Web pages are being accessed, where the user requesting the information is from (not the e-mail address but the IP address, which will need to be converted into domain names), and the time and date the pages were accessed.

Those raw log files themselves aren't very informative or interesting to read, but they can be processed and turned into more palatable information. By running those log files through a special program for generating usage statistics, you can get a clear picture of what pages are being accessed, who is looking at them, and when they are doing so. You can find out information such as your site's daily and hourly transmission statistics, what countries your users come from, and which files were most (and least) popular.

A statistics sheet from a Web site can be rather intriguing. Since the Internet is a global network (and true hackers never sleep, anyway) Web sites dole out information 24 hours a day. The Web server that my home page lives on is busiest between 11 AM and 4 PM Pacific time, but remains active into the wee hours of the morning. Mondays and Tuesdays are the server's most popular days.

Each time someone looks at a Web page, it counts as one "hit." An especially popular Web sites might see upwards of 10,000 hits per day. Typical Web sites might record from 1,000 to 2,000 daily hits. A "hit" means the page was looked at once. 2,000 hits doesn't necessarily mean that 2,000 people saw your page; it means that it was seen 2,000 times. It's possible, although unlikely, that one person alone "hit" your page 2,000 times!

My Web server runs on a Mac, and I use a program called WebStat to generate the statistics files. If you use another server, you'll probably need a different stats program, such as getstats, available from Enterprise Integration Technologies (**http://www.eit.com/software/getstats/getstats.html**). From this page you'll find links to other statistics-generating packages available on the Internet. Check the documentation for your Web server to find out which stats program you can use. ◆

The Help Desk is a regular feature of this newsletter. Questions are answered by Kevin Savetz, a contributing editor of the* Guide *and author of* Your Internet Consultant *(SAMS, 1994). You can submit questions care of David Peal, Editor, at (202) 739-9541 or* **dpeal@ix.netcom.com.

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